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ILLINOIS JAILS AND THE KANGAROO COURT

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The Illinois State Charities Commission has just issued its second annual report. The jail inspector relates a plain, unvarnished tale which would be incredible if it were not authoritatively attested. Having been an inspector of county jails for fifteen years, I know from personal observation the dreadful and almost incredible conditions which exist in most of them. While there have been extraordinary improvements in the administration of state prisons and state reformatories during the past thirty years, there has been very little if any improvement of the condition of county jails and police stations. The jail ought to be and might be the most effective reformatory institution in the land. The jail receives the prisoner at the moment of opportunity and in the crisis of his life at the time when he has first fallen into the hands of the law, and when he realizes for the first time the inevitable results of the reckless course which he has been pursuing.

What do we do with the delinquent youth? We thrust him into a vile, unsanitary jail. We expose him to public view in a steel cage like a wild beast in a menagerie. We force him into idle association with the worst characters that can be collected and we establish at public expense a free school of vice and crime. It is to be hoped that the Juvenile Protective Association of Chicago will establish a state-wide organization to deal with the conditions equally abominable which exist throughout the State of Illinois.

The following extracts from the report of the commission relative to county jails illustrate the situation:

It appears to be almost impossible to arouse public attention to the glaring wrongs. Indifference chills every effort toward reform. . . . All that we said in our last report would bear repetition in stronger terms. There is no cause in the betterments noticed in the sanitation of jails to warrant the withdrawal of one word of our condemnation of the jail system in Illinois. (Pp. 42-43.)

Last year only eight jails were found in which clean sheets and blankets

were provided weekly. This year there is an improvement denoted by five: the total is thirteen. (There are one hundred county jails in Illinois.)

Seventeen sheriffs this year report that they do not detain insane persons in the jail. . . . Twenty-six counties which have made special provision for this class do not, however, keep the quarters clean and in proper condition. In the main, this provision consists of ill-ventilated, dirty, padded cells. . . .

The inspector found that the law requiring segregation of minors (ch. 75, sec. 11) is absolutely violated in seventy-two of the one hundred counties visited. The sheriffs are unable to comply with the law while their county boards fail to provide adequate quarters for minors. Including sixteen children under sixteen years of age there were found this year 152 minors in jail . . . most of whom were confined with murderers, thieves and criminals of all classes. (P. 44.)

More than half of the jails are so unsanitary that the sheriff cannot possibly maintain them in "good and sufficient condition and repair" as the law requires. (Ch. 75, sec. 1.)

There are eleven counties wherein no provision is made for women. Many counties comply with the letter of the law which requires separate cells for women, but fail to segregate their cells from those of the men. (P. 45.)

Kangaroo Courts

"There has been an increase in the jails which permit the Kangaroo Court from 25 in 1910 to 29 in 1911" (p. 44). The "Kangaroo Court" is a voluntary organization of prisoners in jails, one by which a rough discipline is maintained, incoming prisoners are hazed, prisoners are assigned to work in the policing of the jail, and in some cases fines are imposed and collected. In other words, prisoners are compelled to work, contrary to law, are disciplined by their fellows and in some cases are actually robbed with the connivance and consent of the officers in charge.

On page 300 the inspector reports as follows: "Knox county prisoners have a Kangaroo Court, but the sheriff carefully supervises it; for example, he will not allow the prisoners to fine one another unless the person fined agrees to it." This statement implies what is doubtless true, that in other jails prisoners are fined whether they agree to it or not; but it makes little difference; the prisoner is likely to "agree" when he knows that he will be hazed or beaten if he refuses. On the same page the inspector says, "There is no place for minors. . . . At the time of inspection, five minors of nineteen years of age, and one, seventeen, were placed in jail with the men." On page 312, reporting on the Peoria County Jail, the inspector says, "The men do most of their own disciplining by means of the Kangaroo

Court. They have two dark rooms for punishment cells, but the usual method of dealing with a man who has violated one of their laws is to sentence him to hard labor." On page 316, reporting on the Rock Island County Jail, the inspector says, "The prisoners have a Kangaroo Court; from the revenue they take two daily papers and buy their tobacco and shaving soap." On page 322 with reference to, the reporting on the Vermilion County Jail, the inspector says "The prisoners in the various wards have Kangaroo Courts. As they are allowed to keep their money in jail, it would be very uncomfortable for prisoners who refused to join the court and thus failed to contribute their money for the purpose of newspapers, tobacco and other articles which the county does not furnish."

The jail inspector's report of sixty pages is a sickening chronicle of dirt, filth, vermin, bad air, over crowding, lack of proper discipline, idleness, enforced association of the insane and criminals, deliberate violation of the laws with reference to the separate court of children and minors and inhuman treatment of the insane.

The chronicles of John Howard with reference to jails of Europe and George Kennan's vivid description of the Russian prisons are no worse than the conditions officially set forth in this report.

The following extracts from the inspector's reports taken as they come will serve as illustrations:

Adams County

The sunlight never reaches the fourteen cells located in the interior of the jail room. No provision is made for minors; in violation of the law, they must be placed in the main jail.

Alexander County

The seventeen prisoners shuffle up and down a corridor about thirteen feet long, dark, damp and ill ventilated; this is all the exercise afforded them.

Quantities of disinfectant are used, but as the county provides the men no change of clothing, no bathing facilities and neither washes the bedding nor equips the men to wash them decently, vermin of all kinds infest the place. . . .

Two separate cells are provided for women; they are dark, damp, ill-ventilated; the toilets are unsanitary, the bedding is dirty. Insane are placed in the jail with other prisoners, unless one of the cells for females is unoccupied.

Carroll County

Two boys of seventeen and nineteen were in the jail at the time of inspection. They were allowed the freedom of the entire jail, which consists of a single cage for men, women, children and insane.

Clark County

There is a rusty iron cage with four cells each 6 x 11 x 7. . . . It is necessary to place six prisoners in a cell when the jail is crowded. . . . The women's section adjoins that of the men. Communication between male and female prisoners is easy.

Crawford County

The jail is an old stone structure, dark, damp and ill-ventilated. Men, women, minors, insane, must all be confined in one jail-room. . . . The bedding is never washed. There is no bath tub.

Coles County

Women are placed on the second floor; men are not usually placed on the second floor when there are female prisoners.

Cumberland County

Women occupy three iron cells on the second floor. As the approach to these cells is of wooden construction, the danger from fire is obvious. No bath or toilet is supplied for the female department.

DuPage County

Women are placed in any of four cells which face the sheriff's office. At the time of inspection, a delinquent boy and a delinquent girl, each fourteen years of age, were occupying two of these cells. They were not locked in.

Franklin County

Many of the comforts used in the jail are very dirty; there are some bed-bugs. Blankets which can be washed should be used, and prisoners required to change their clothing weekly.

Gallatin County

The jail-rooms are ventilated by means of a few windows one by two feet. Openings, about the same size, serve as doorways. The entire interior construction is of wood; there is no fire protection. No plumbing or sewage is provided.

Greene County

At the time of inspection, there were four minors in the jail. They were not separated from the older men. One boy nineteen years of age has waited trial for about six months; his offense is having stolen and sold a pair of rubber boots.

Hamilton County

The jail is condemnable from every point of view. It is damp, ill-ventilated, the cells are dark, there are no toilet or bathing facilities. No provision is made for minors.

Jasper County

The jail is old and has been condemned for many years. The plastering is broken in many places; the wooden construction throughout the interior renders it an unsafe place of detention. . . . A woman was confined in a dilapidated old cell. No bathing facilities are provided for men or women.

Jefferson County

Cots, furnished with springs, mattresses and comforts are used for beds. As the comforts cannot be washed satisfactorily, many of them are badly soiled. The deputy sheriff, who acts as jailer, states that the comforts and many of the old mattresses will be burned immediately, and that blankets will be purchased in the future as they can be washed.

Logan County

Old mattresses, placed on the floors, are used as beds. Men must wear their own clothing in jail, a fact which makes it necessary to use large quantities of disinfectant to get rid of vermin. A padded cell in the main jail has been provided for insane men. It is musty, there is no ventilation; the padding affords a nesting place to rats and mice. The present sheriff has remained up during the night with insane patients who begged to be released from this dungeon. It is to be hoped that the county officials will make it possible for the sheriff to meet the requirements of the law with reference to jails.

McLean County

The jail should be condemned, as it is so dark that artificial lighting is necessary during the day; it is ill-ventilated; and insufficient provision is made for compliance with the law for segregation of minors.

Madison County

Minors are placed in the main jail, with older offenders. At the time of inspection, eight minors were detained with older and hardened men.

Marion County

Rats and mice abound, as the walls and floors are full of holes. The jail is extremely damp. The jail is unsafe as a place of detention; it makes no provision for compliance with the law for segregation of minors. It is damp and unsanitary in every particular.

Massac County

There is no bath tub. The county allows nothing for washing, so the men wash out their clothing in water, which they warm upon the heating stove. The county does not supply prisoners with clothing, towels, razors, reading matter.

Menard County

As the windows are about twenty feet from the floor, the cells are very dark and ill-ventilated. The jail is so dark that artificial lights must be turned on all day, and the law requiring separate provision for minors is not complied with. No turnkey is provided, but a "trustee" is allowed to tend the jail at times.

Moultrie County

The inside construction of the jail-room is of wood, only the cells being lined with iron. As the escape from the jail consists only of wooden stairs, it is very dangerous to confine prisoners here.

Peoria County

As the county allows nothing for washing, the men are required to clean their own towels, bedding and clothes. The dampness of the jail renders it almost impossible to dry woolen blankets, so the bedding is aired daily, and replaced when it becomes very dirty.

Rock Island County

The juvenile department is on the second floor, above the men's department. There are but two cells, so most of the eight minors present sleep on the floor. Bedbugs and rats abound in this department. The air is bad. It is scarcely to be hoped that the young men of seventeen, nineteen and twenty confined here, will learn the lessons of good citizenship in this dungeon.

Williamson County

Although the county does not supply a change of clothing, and comforts which cannot be washed satisfactorily are used for bedding, the present jailer has managed to get the bedbugs out of the cells.

The conditions found in the county jails are no worse than those which exist in the police stations and average lock-ups of the state which are without official inspection, and the conditions in the jails of Illinois are no worse than those which may be found in nearly every state of the Union. A bill is now pending in Congress for the establishment of a government commission to examine the condition of jails and prisons in which United States prisoners are confined. This bill was earnestly advocated by Attorney-General Wickersham and ought to have the support of every good citizen.